

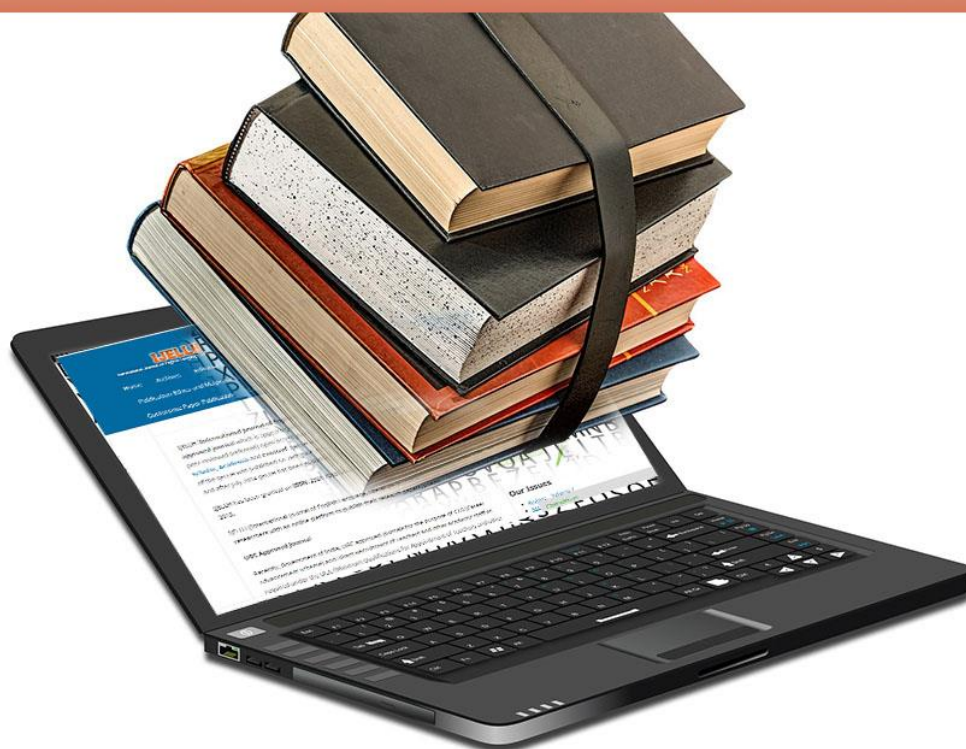
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Adopted Child: A Study of Trauma in Deborah Jiang Stein's *Prison Baby*

Trauma is often defined as an injury of the mind, which is caused by a deeply disturbing event. Experiencing violence in any form or an emotional shock can cause Trauma to an individual. Deborah Jiang Stein, in her memoir *Prison Baby* (2014) writes about the most distressing event of her life when as a child of twelve, she learns that, she has been adopted. What is even more traumatic for her is the revelation that she was born in a prison to a heroin-addicted mother. The sudden discovery that she has been separated from her biological mother and that she spent the first year of her life in prison, leads her into emotional lockdown and trauma. She faces severe identity crisis as she is unable to identify herself with her adoptive parents and feels lost. For years, Deborah turns to drugs, violence and crime to cope with her grief. Eventually, she reconciles with her past and forges her way through healing. The text is replete with the symptoms of trauma like intense anxiety, silence, dreams, agitated behaviour, withdrawal etc. A close reading of the text in the light of the trauma theory will provide insight into understanding childhood trauma. The paper aims to elucidate the different concepts of trauma and ascertain as to why Deborah is traumatised, the effects it has on her mind and what eventually helps her dissipate her trauma.

Keywords- *Trauma, Adoption, Identity Crisis, Substance Abuse, Prison Baby*

Paper: Trauma is defined as an injury of the mind caused by an extremely negative event. Various reasons that can lead to trauma can be physical as well as psychological in nature. The reasons can vary from physical and sexual abuse, assault, witnessing war, terrorism,

domestic violence, natural disasters, life-threatening diseases to the death of a loved one, neglect or abandonment, rejection, loss etc. During its inception, Trauma was referred to as a physical injury but as its concept developed, it was used to describe the psychologically overwhelming experience of an individual. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* states “...Trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3).

Trauma is caused whenever an individual is subjected to a shocking, painful event which is outside one's wish or control. In her memoir *Prison Baby* Deborah Jiang Stein recalls a very stressful event that she underwent as a child and its after effects that carried on for almost two decades after the event had occurred. When she was twelve years old, she discovered a letter in her parents' bedroom that revealed the truth about her birth in prison. The sudden discovery that she was born in a prison to a heroin-addicted mother causes her to spiral into emotional lockdown and trauma. She writes,

I tuck the paper back under the liner and float from the dresser into my parents' bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror over their sink, my body in overload. Time and space distort inside me. I don't know where I am. My feet seem to lift, my body and brain separated by some wedge, and I'm disconnected from my house, from my neighbourhood, from Earth, from Humanity. (4)

Learning about their adoption is an overwhelming experience for children. To know that they are separated from their natural clan negatively influences their psychology. They grieve the loss of their biological family. As an adopted child, Deborah is also unable to come to terms with her past. She feels traumatized. Strozier, Charles B, et al. The editors of *Trauma and self* state: “This ‘cumulative adoption’ trauma begins when adoptees are separated from the mother at birth: builds when they learn that they were not born to the people they call mother and father; and is further compounded when they are denied knowledge of the mother and father to whom they were born.” (20)

Trauma is understood in relation to the psyche and how it results in disrupting the mental faculties of a person, temporarily. After the unexpected event has occurred, it is only after some time that the person suffers the symptoms of shock. The experience of trauma repeats itself through the unknowing acts of the survivor and is against one's will. It is too abrupt to get settled in one's consciousness and is put forth in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, depression, changes in appetite, withdrawal etc. These are the scars of trauma and

they represent its after effects. As Cathy Caruth writes, “...so trauma is not locatable in the simple, violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (4)

After Deborah has read the letter, she tries to escape this bitter truth and forces her brain to divorce from reality. The memory of reading that letter is difficult for her to forget.

Don’t think about it. It’s not true, none of it happened. Not even the letter...I forget I’ve read the letter, forget everything in it. Gone. Zip. Out of my mind, and it doesn’t show up again until a flash about a month later. May be not a month, may be eight. I forget this too. These new facts about my prison birth never stay in my brain or anywhere inside me long enough to grasp. But something this big can’t hide for long. Buried secrets live forever, glued to our insides like sticky rice...The anguish seeps out of me like poison trapped in a balloon-sized blister. (5)

Family is the most important unit of society and if people feel that their trust has been abused by someone in the family, then they feel traumatic. In case of children, they are unable to trust anyone and they feel insecure even in the midst of family members. Their sense of security is disrupted and they feel that they cannot rely on the people closest to them. Jenny Edkins puts forth her views regarding the betrayal of trust in her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*:

...But this seems that to be called traumatic- to produce what are seen as symptoms of trauma-an event has to be more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. In an important sense, it has to entail something else. It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well... This can be devastating because who we are, or who we think we maybe, depends very closely on the social context in which we place and find ourselves. Our existence relies not only on our personal survival as individual beings but also, in a very profound sense, on the continuance of the social order that gives our existence meaning and dignity: family, friends, political community, beliefs. If that order betrays us in some way, we may survive in the sense of continuing to live as physical beings, but the meaning of our existence is changed...Events seen as traumatic seem to reflect a particular form of intimate bond between personhood and community and, most importantly, they expose the part played by relations of power. For the child, abuse involves betrayal by the person the child should most be able to trust. (4)

Deborah has a lot of questions in her mind regarding her adoption and her birth mother but those questions are not answered by anyone. The details surrounding her birth remain a mystery. "Tell me everything! Who is she? My mother, my other mother, why didn't she want me? Where is she?" (8) She is torn between two worlds and is unable to connect with any of her mother. She cannot identify herself with anyone in the family and her feeling of belongingness is disrupted. She feels rejected and betrayed by her biological mother as well as by her adoptive mother.

The deeper my mother digs in the dirt, the more hatred is dredged up in me. Mother-blame sets in. I hate her for her brief answer, hate her for adopting me, and hate myself for being adopted...Why didn't my prison mother keep me? Didn't she want me? If I love Mother, am I betraying my other mother? But isn't she the one who didn't want me? (9)

After encountering the traumatic situation, one cannot overcome it in a day. It's a long process and the traumatized person goes through different stages in order to heal. In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra uses the expressions 'acting out' and 'working through' to explain the process. He says that both these parts are intimately related. Acting out means that the person is stuck in past. The individual repeats the traumatic event compulsively or in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. It means that they are still not distant from their past. Deborah's past about her prison roots keeps on intruding in her present life. She is haunted by the upsetting thoughts. When she tries to spend some time with her adoptive mother, she is hit with the memory of the past and she writes "...if I relaxed a little with our closeness, something took over, like a thorny fist in my gut. I'd march off to the solitude of my room and leave her to sit alone, a piece of half-eaten toast and a dollop of my favourite raspberry jam left on my plate." (31)

In the years that followed, Deborah is also haunted by a recurring dream in which she sees unrecognizable faces of women behind vertical lines peering down at her as she lies in her bed. She responds to trauma by showing regressive behaviour like thumb sucking and bed wetting. "I have no idea if Mother heard me cry-whether it was from my bedwetting, even as a grade-school girl, or from my angst about waking up in the morning with my thumb in my mouth-but I knew she cared for me in the night." (11) In the memoir, she also recollects how she remains quiet about her troubled feelings. She feels shameful about her prison roots and starts showing withdrawal symptoms. She shuts herself down and locks the psychological

vault for a long time. It results in years of silence and solitude for her: “All the wrong out there, I store deep inside a cave, and stay mute for days at a time, day after day after day. No one can get to my deepest feelings.” (13)

She feels convinced that no one in the family loves her. She also harbours a fear of abandonment and has nightmares:

I was scared she'd abandon me like all the rest. Still, I'd wake from nightmares where I pushed Mother off a cliff and she'd tumble a mile down but as soon as my hand pressed into her back, I'd panic and try to save her...I'd wake up guilt-ridden and sweaty, my pillow soaked with tears. I was scared of myself, horrified about the bad in me with these dreams, but also frightened that I'd end up without a mother again. (47)

In order to deal with the trauma she faces, Deborah chooses a self-destructive path in which she gets involved in violent street life and drug abuse. Consumption of alcohol and other drugs help her in drowning her despair. Childhood trauma increases the risk of depression and substance abuse. The traumatized person can turn to alcohol and other drugs to dampen their feelings. Johanna O'Flaherty in her book *The correlation between Trauma and Addiction* writes “...alcohol and other drugs help numb the distress, the anxiety, the depression, and the fear precipitated by trauma.” The unpleasant fact about her birth strains her mind. The stress that she goes through makes her upset and she engages in crime as a result. Unable to cope with the pressure, she makes use of drugs to make herself feel better. “It's divine. The coke and heroin flood through me, a chemical orgasm, part birth and part death. It's all a gift, and I'm home!” (53)

After going through almost two decades of troubled emotions, Deborah decides to step out of the dark corners of her life. She seeks medical aid and also takes therapeutic treatment. She is assessed as a full-blown addict and then she starts with the process of cleaning up. She realises that her emotional development has been stunted. “Twelve! Inside a thirty-two-year-old's body.” (75) As she tries to overcome her negativity, she expresses her feelings in the memoir:

CHIP, CHIP, CHIP. I break through the walls I've built, the fortress around me. Each chip feels like a slab of concrete crashed to the ground. But clean and sober, I'm still fear-filled, and the fear shields a raw wound. A smidgen of a crevice opens to let in

my parents and I take baby steps in a giant's shoes to close the gap and reacquaint myself with them. (77)

Working through involves a process in which the trauma is acknowledged and fully understood as a part of life. The traumatised person accepts the past and also the fact that it cannot be altered. One learns to mourn and live with it. The traumatized person is able to comprehend that the past, present and future are different. LaCapra writes that, "one is also able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future." (22)

Deborah finally decides to abandon her reckless life. She visits the prison that she called home for the first year of her life. She makes peace with her past and reconciles with her adoptive parents with whom she had become emotionally detached. She reframes her view of the past with a new perspective and starts to look at life through a different lens. She finally decides to talk about it and writes, "I'm less and less afraid of the dark corners, less terrified of my own story with its twists and turns. I've grown to understand how secrets don't destroy us, but the keeping of secrets can kill us." (127)

Writing down her memoir is also a way of healing her inner scars. She introspects and documents her bittersweet memories. She goes past her suffering and draws lessons from her life. In the Preface to his book *Signifying Pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing* Judith Harris proclaims, "Writing about painful experiences is at least one way of repairing the self by reconstructing personal traumas or crises to better contend with them." (xi)

She volunteers to work at prisons and inspire other women by sharing her story with them. She works as a mentor for women and girls in prison. She also meets her birth family and learns facts about her biological mother. She makes her life into an integrated whole and starts focusing on the present. "No matter where we are, now is all we have." (154)

Conclusion: The paper analyses trauma as a human experience. The writer pens down the highs and lows of her journey. She finally accepts her unpleasant experiences as a part of life and outgrows them. The psyche of the writer is also studied in the present paper. Her story proves that redemption and acceptance are possible, even from the darkest corners.

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